

Another La Niña Winter

Winter Outlook for 2011-2012

By Mike Huston

For the second winter in a row, La Niña will influence weather patterns across the country, but it won't be the only factor at play. As you may know, La Niña is associated with cooler than normal water temperatures across the Equatorial Pacific Ocean. These cooler water temperatures in turn promote changes in the atmospheric weather circulations which impact North America (see Fig. 1). The overall result of these changes is an increased frequency of cold-air outbreaks across the northern-tier states and considerable month-to-month variability exhibited in the storminess flowing into the northwest along the Pacific Jet Stream throughout the winter. For southeast Idaho, La Niña "typically" produces cooler than normal temperatures across the region and a somewhat less reliable wetter than normal precipitation pattern.

La Niña is not the only pattern that will likely impact the weather across southeast Idaho this winter. A number of other patterns that develop and dissipate within a single season can also impact the overall outcome. Unfortunately, these "intraseasonal" climate patterns are not easily forecast months in advance like La Niña and at times can overwhelm or even amplify typical La Niña impacts. Armed with the knowledge that the La Niña pattern will likely strengthen as we progress into the heart of winter and that recent data trends suggests that there is an increasing tendency toward wetter and warmer La Niña winters across the northern tier states including Idaho, the forecasters at the Climate Prediction Center have produced a preliminary forecast calling for equal chances of being above normal, near normal, or below normal with respect to temperature (Fig. 2) and a nearly 50 percent chance of being wetter than normal, a 32 percent chance of being near normal, or an 18 percent chance of being drier than normal (Fig. 3) for a large part of southeast Idaho.

Updated outlooks are issued on the third Thursday of each month at:

http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/lanina/.

For now, the most prudent action one could take is to approach the winter armed with the expectations suggestive of a developing La Niña while remaining prepared for the variability that will surely accompany the winter weather of 2011-2012.

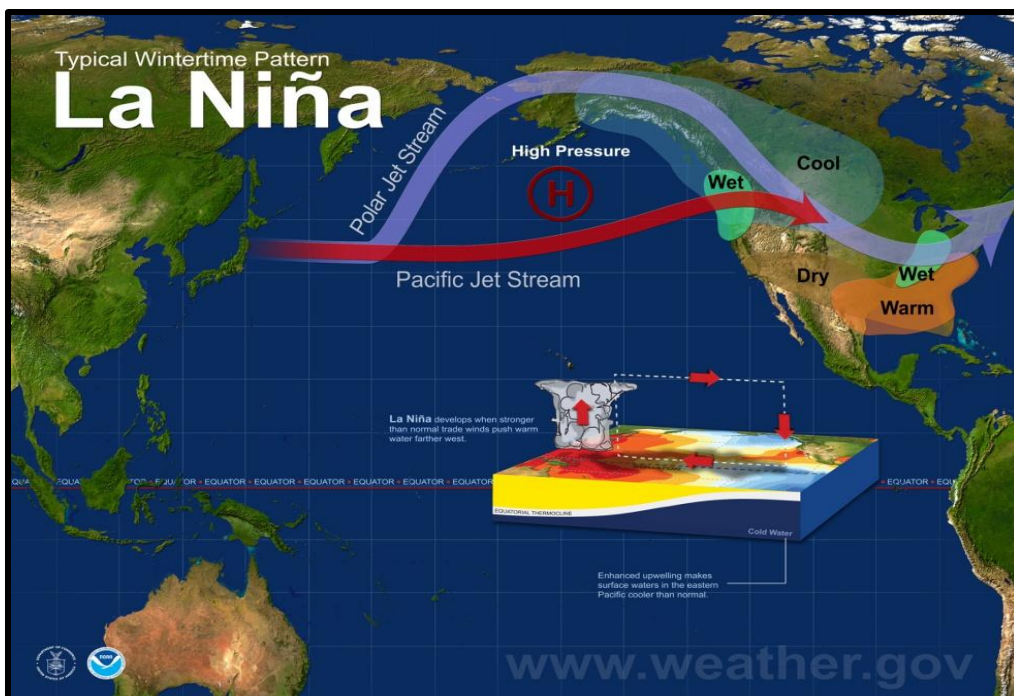


Figure 1. Typical La Niña Wintertime Weather Pattern

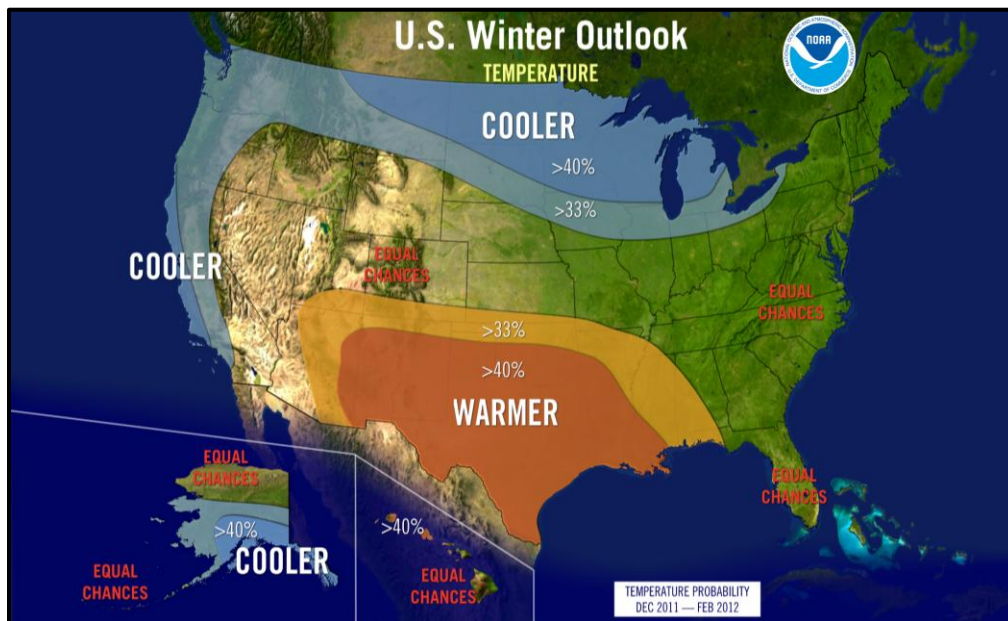


Figure 2. CPC Temperature Winter Outlook for December, January and February.

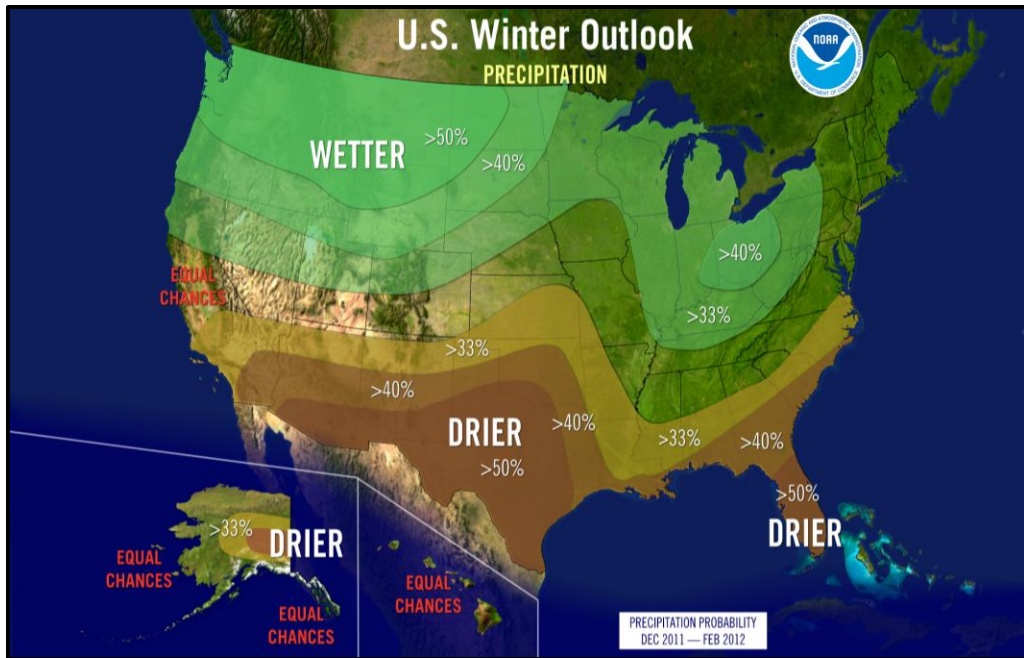


Figure 3. CPC Precipitation Winter Outlook for December, January and February.